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ABSTRACT

At Glendale Community College in Arizona, speech and theater formed one department before it was merged, for organizational and budgetary reasons, with the music department. In 1989, this combined department was again merged with another, this time the foreign language and sign language department. To many faculty the decision seemed arbitrary and insensitive. Nonetheless, the common denominator among the departments of student and aesthetic production of human communication in all of its potential manifestations was undeniable. The first chair of this division was a woman from the speech communication discipline. Her style was truly gentle, caring, and loving; she was an important cohesive force at a difficult time for these various disciplines. For the person who took over as chair afterwards, however, it seemed that a different, more aggressive, less diplomatic style of leadership was called for to build the department. As schisms, feuds and recalcitrance developed among the faculty, actions had to be taken. First, conflicts were taken to a higher, less personal, and more definitive level. Repeated infractions were no longer tolerated. Second, the new chair relied heavily on at least one trusted member of each discipline. Such reliance allowed him to spend time resolving various complaints and difficulties arising throughout the division. (TB)

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Building Community:
Communication Principles and Practices Across the Curriculum

ED 380 836

Building Community:
Facilitating Communication Within a Multi-disciplinary Department

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of a division chair in facilitating communication within a Multi-disciplinary department. To do this, it is first necessary to understand the make-up of a department, both historically and in its current configuration, making specific reference to Glendale Community College. Next, the discussion must center on how the chair's position, both academic and administrative, fits into the framework of that division. We will continue with a discussion of the levels of communication within the several, at times independent and disparate departments that make up the division, and finally integrate those separate academic groups into a unified whole that communicates effectively to function as a single entity. Glendale Community College is one of ten sister institutions in the Maricopa Community College District in Arizona. When GCC, the third of the current ten colleges, opened in 1965, the various academic disciplines were organized by departments. Each department was, and still is, chaired by an elected faculty member, whose two-year term rotates among the full-time department members. Contrary to this rotation system, at GCC each chair's term of office may continue for an indefinite and extended period. Some chairs have served

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more than twenty years. Faculty members in the department may choose to elect a new chair or the chair may be subsumed by another larger division. The specific roles of the department or division chair are: communicating the department's needs to the administration and carrying out the normal departmental duties of scheduling classes; hiring full-time and adjunct faculty; evaluating faculty and staff; overseeing budgets; responding to student complaints; interceding in departmental conflicts between faculty members; and generally making sure that the department does not project a negative image.

As the number of disciplines and departments expanded due to the growth of the community college, it became more and more burdensome for the administration to effectively deal with each academic discipline as a separate and distinct unit. Therefore, at GCC, the President began to merge smaller departments into more complex and diverse divisions, sometimes seemingly disparate in nature, yet with some common denominators that helped to bring unity to the whole. For example, English, Reading and Journalism were combined under one division chair. Over a period spanning several years, the Department of Communication and Theater was eventually reorganized to include Music and Foreign Languages (including Sign Language). At the outset, the reasoning behind this departmental reorganization seemed arbitrary, especially since the justification for the decision was not based on what the faculty members themselves requested or considered logical or academically coherent.

Emulating the nationally recognized tradition in institutions of higher learning, at GCC, Communication and Theater were originally organized into a single, autonomous department. Then GCC's Department of Music was joined with the latter in the early 1980's for political, administrative and, what seemed at the time to be personal reasons: strife within the department and the subsequent retirement of the then chair of Music made it feasible and timely for the

President to decide to merge the smaller Music Department with the larger Communication and Theater department. Although the Music faculty did not understand the logic supporting this decision, they also did not either appreciate or seem to cherish this new alliance with the faculty in Communication and Theater, especially since the chair was not a Music Department member. They felt that they were losing their autonomy, even though they maintained their integrity as a group and their independent budgets. Direct administrative supervision simply passed into the hands of a faculty member, albeit very competent and liked, but one they themselves had not directly elected.

One can reason that all three disciplines, however different, do represent several aspects of the broader field of human communication. Since the Music faculty and the Communication and Theater faculty were scattered around the campus with no pressing curricular or departmental needs to share information other than in the most general of terms, the day-to-day communication among the members of the two departments was neither convenient nor required. The most direct and principal source of communication centered on the daily administration of the department and flowed only from the division chair, a member of the Communication Department, to the individual members of the Music Department. The interaction among the faculty members in Communication and Theater did not substantially change with this new alliance, nor did the majority even notice any major difference, except their chair was less accessible and certainly more occupied than before.

Unquestionably, the collegial interaction among the Music faculty regarding specific topics of interest to the group continued and each member was definitely encouraged to play an active role in the administrative decisions that affected their academic subdivision. Nonetheless, with direct administrative supervision located outside of Music, the communication between the

chair and the faculty members tended to be formal and businesslike, mainly limited to immediate concerns and needs.

The lack of trust and her inability to rely on any single member of the department, based in part on her personal knowledge of the past frictions and the lack of geographic proximity, both in the Music Department and to a lesser degree in the Theater area, compelled the chair to maintain a firm control on all aspects of the department. Since she was very interested in being supportive and encouraging of the Music Department's contributions to the division and the campus, she constantly attempted to foster interaction and a sense of community among all members of both departments. Department meetings were attended by all faculty and each member was treated with equal respect and consideration. Nevertheless, it seemed that the two departments maintained a definite separation, with very little interaction whether in the academic setting or socially away from the daily concerns of the job. The chair carried out her responsibilities professionally (sometimes feeling as if she were functioning in a vacuum), dividing her attention between the immediate needs of each department.

Music received a large portion of her attention, mainly because of its pressing budgetary needs and the previous lack of unity. Because of the diversity of her division, and keeping with the traditional view of academic freedom, the faculty was allowed to function quite independently within the separate departments in the division. The chair did oversee all departmental administrative duties, including scheduling, hiring of full-time and part-time faculty members, supervising curriculum development, evaluating staff yearly, dealing with student complaints and conflicts between faculty members. Administration of the Music Department also required coordinating private lessons for Music students and dealing with the constant budgetary matters of the division--a time-consuming and demanding task, given its large volume of requests for

materials and repairs. Because of these additional duties and the need to maintain a sense of continuity and independence, she relied heavily on the part-time secretary who had worked in the Music Department for several years. Given constraints of time and location, the chair counted on the intrinsic professionalism and integrity of the Music faculty itself to carry out the daily responsibilities, just as each had done when Music was an independent unit.

Given the difficulty and abruptness of the merger, the department chair rightly felt that she did not want to immediately reorganize the entire division to better conform to her personal management style, consequently she accepted the status quo. In addition, retirements and changes in personnel eliminated some more divisive elements within the department. The concomitant hiring of new faculty and staff led the chair to believe that the Music faculty would begin to function more smoothly as a cohesive group, and in turn, come to participate more actively within the larger framework of the division. Henceforth her routine, previously requiring almost daily intervention in all aspects of the Music Department, would not be as demanding. She could then begin to draw the Music Department and its faculty more closely into the larger community of the division.

Complicating an already difficult merger between Communication and Music, the Department of Foreign Languages and Sign Language was merged with the Communication/Theater/Music division in 1989 after the sudden retirement of its long-time chair, creating an even more challenging and complex task. Again, to many faculty (not simply those immediately and personally involved), the decision seemed arbitrary and unilateral, with administrative convenience and budgetary considerations being the major underlying factors in the reorganizational plan. Nonetheless, the common denominator among the departments of the study and aesthetic production of human communication in all of its potential manifestations was

undeniable. And to facilitate this stage of the plan, the Foreign Language faculty shared an office building with the Communication faculty, thus eliminating the obstacle of distance in the building of the new division community. This final stage in the reorganization created a very pleasant, harmonious and productive union of the various components (excluding those under the umbrella of the division of English, Reading and Journalism) that together encompass the very nature of human communication.

It is extremely important to bear in mind that the division chair, prior to and throughout the reorganizational plan, was a long-time, highly respected member of the original Department of Communication and Theater. Undoubtedly, her knowledge of the theories and practices of human communication, in particular Interpersonal, Small Group and Organizational communication, tempered with her truly gentle, caring and loving personality, played a decisive role in her expert supervision and efficient management of such a diverse division. Her interest in each member and her continued support for each department, never making any feel inferior or less worthwhile than the others, were always abundantly apparent to all. It should also be pointed out that, for several years before administering this large division, she had become the chair of the Department of Communication and Theater, a fairly small and homogeneous department staffed by five full-time faculty members, one full-time theater technician, a shared secretary working for several departments, and several part-time faculty members. The addition and increased complexity of her administrative responsibilities, not to mention the new communication techniques required to efficiently govern such a heterogeneous grouping, came in several planned stages. Thus she could gradually grow into the position as the chair of a multi-disciplinary division. Notwithstanding this steady increase in the scope of her responsibilities, her keen and positive direction, her intelligence and breadth of experience, her

caring attitude, her role of peace maker, and her enthusiasm as chair acted as the essential elements that, at first ostensibly, and eventually, permanently would fuse the various disparate departments into one.

Consequently, as the newly expanded division moved into the 1990's and with the election of a new chair, it was inevitable that changes would occur throughout the division, both in the various departments and the total structure of the unit. The division had grown to be one of the largest on the campus: 15 full-time faculty members, two theater technicians, one full-time secretary and a part-time secretary in Music, plus approximately 20 day adjunct faculty and 3 emeritus teaching faculty. Along with the normal administrative duties common to all chairs, I am responsible for the Performing Arts Center and the Foreign Language Laboratory. The Recording Studio and Electronic Studio, although technically under my supervision, are ably operated and maintained by the Music faculty.

Thus, the many changes in the division are predicated on a several expected and easily explainable variables. First, and of principal importance, my communication and management styles are extremely different from those of the former chair. I do continue to aspire for a strong unity among all of the diverse components of the division (both in the formal setting of the institution and in a sociable and casual setting away from the confines of the college). At the same time I choose to play a very active role in matters of significance to the individual departments and the division as a whole, particularly in the areas of budgets, staffing and curriculum. The laissez-faire attitude concerning individual faculty members continues to be the principal organizational style, both among faculty and within the departments. However, the principles and practices of Institutional Effectiveness, currently on the lips of all administrators, have come to play an important and decisive role in helping to shape and unify the division. In

addition, although departmental unity and congeniality are emphasized, I do not feel comfortable assuming the role of peace maker, preferring rather to face the problems headon, resolve them and then move on, hoping that even if the faculty members cannot forget the past, they can at least act professionally and maintain harmony within the division.

Although I do not possess the same theoretical training in the specialized area of communication that my predecessor had, I am extremely familiar with campus and district operations and personnel, having been a member of the Foreign Language faculty for more than 20 years and having served on many campus and district committees. Likewise, stepping into the leadership position of an already restructured division that was beginning to bond and to function as a unit, rather than building it up from a smaller, unified department into a larger, more complex and diversified division, carries with it its own set of challenges. Lastly, the handing off of the baton from a female to a male supervisor definitely carries with it many new challenges, conditions, attitudes and procedures, both for me and the division members, that have to be incorporated into the patterns of communication within the division.

Throughout the transition from a female chair to a male chair and from a communication professor to a foreign language professor, the department members were faced with a drastic change in style that they perhaps had not anticipated or found difficult to fully accept. My sometimes too direct, determined, task-oriented and self-assured approach, motivated in part by a lack of familiarity with or understanding of the routine department procedures and a very strong sense of commitment, may have had the unintentional effect of superiority, thereby putting off less determined and self-assured department members. This may have prompted them to have feelings of inadequacy, intimidation or confusion regarding their assigned responsibilities. Likewise, the sudden change from a leader whose academic development had been structured by

the basic principles of human communication theory to one whose academic formation was in the area of second-language acquisition and literature may have been difficult. Nonetheless, because of my training in foreign languages and cultures, I was extremely cognizant and sensitive to the individual and group divergences normally expected in the process of human communication.

This change in leadership was immediately confronted with a number of immediate challenges that demanded action. Guided by the principles of a competency based approach to education both in management and communication styles, I expected each member of the division to be skilled in his or her assigned duties and to continue to carry them out efficiently and in a timely manner. I faced departmental problems more directly and involved the administration in decisions which previously had been made on a fairly informal, departmental level, by allowing the individual members to resolve their own interpersonal conflicts. Although this former approach had worked quite effectively at the time the departments were still in a state of flux, it did tend to gloss over or overlook immediate discord among individuals and within the departments. However, since the administration had mandated the reorganization without direct faculty input, the previous chair felt it was her sole responsibility to avoid discord and keep the emerging division functioning as smoothly as possible. On a day-to-day basis it must have seemed that the members of the departments had resolved their differences and were working as a group. Needless to say, it was also physically impossible for the chair to be available at every minute or to be knowledgeable of all division matters not directly brought to her attention. So, under this presumed tranquillity, the old wounds continued to fester, preparing to resurface for me to deal with.

I am certain the chair was relying on the professionalism of the individuals involved. She hoped they could learn to work together as a unit, forgetting (or at least putting aside) their individual differences for the good of the whole. Unfortunately this was not the case. Several of these conflicts continued to grow and finally became of more immediate concern to the department and the administration. And unfortunately these problems, which may originally have been brought on by differences in personality among the various faculty members, became generally more pervasive and destructive within several of the departments. More importantly, the academic programs began to suffer and the students became enmeshed in the turmoil. It was imperative that decisive action be taken to stop the escalation of conflicts and to mend the fabric of the community.

This action took several forms. First, because of the decision to involve the administration more directly in division matters, I forced the resolutions of conflict to a higher, less personal, and more definitive level. No longer would repeated infractions of procedures and policies be overlooked or tolerated. If we were to function as a community, each member would have to participate equally, not unilaterally. Formal meetings to resolve individual academic problems and to help the individual function in the broader sense of the group were held with those faculty members who persisted in ignoring district policy; whose classroom performance evaluations did not meet departmental standards; and against whom there were repeated student and/or faculty complaints. These meetings followed a strict, formalized procedure, first on the department level, then on the administrative level, involving deans, faculty presidents, myself and, when appropriate, an assistant chair. Specific demands and limitations were outlined intended to assist the problematic faculty to comply with acceptable academic standards and procedures. There were follow-up evaluations and meetings to ensure that all requirements were

being followed. Obviously it would have been totally inadvisable for the previous chair to have undertaken these administrative processes with the faculty during her tenure. We must keep in mind that her main directive was to bring the three autonomous departments together into a division. Besides, a substantial number of the faculty in the division were new to the district, non-tenured, and as such, required time to develop academically and professionally. Unfortunately, even though she may have observed individual faculty member's irregular patterns of behavior which might eventually lead to difficulties, she did not have either the time or the opportunity to deal with them on a regular basis since hers was a broader, more encompassing perspective for the division.

The second element that directly impacted my ability to act decisively was my reliance on and complete trust in one key member of each department to give me sound and objective input. Duties that had previously fallen completely on the chair, mainly because she did not feel she could rely on or single out any particular member from each department, could now be entrusted to the assistant chairs, permitting me to direct my attention to individual faculty members' needs and to take the time required to verify that the policies and procedures of the district were being followed. In addition, more of my time could be dedicated to resolving the numerous student complaints that invariably occurred. I had the time and energy to complete the required mountains of paperwork and to conduct the needed evaluations and conferences to ensure that the faculty member, whose performance did not meet the standards of the division, was given direction, assistance and the opportunity to improve. I was also more available on a regular basis to assist individual faculty members with matters that ranged from the personal and confidential to the academic and administrative. Believing my main role to be that of a facilitator, this additional time has allowed me regularly to interact with the full-time faculty on

many levels, thereby extending the depth and bonds of our community. We have also been able to integrate our adjunct faculty more directly into the community of the division, by presenting workshops and orientations for new and continuing part-time faculty, outlining the departmental goals and objectives for our curricula.

In conclusion, the restructuring of the division and the change in personnel, coupled with the election to the chair's position of a faculty member not previously immersed in the old conflicts, combined to create a division that could function as a single unit and focus on the future. With the renewed emphasis on competency and accountability, accompanied by a more direct and less nurturing style of communication, we are attempting to make the division function in a more structured manner. By being able to rely on the assistant chairs and staff members to complete the more routine duties previously performed by the chair, I have had the time to deal with more pressing administrative concerns, particularly in the area of staffing. I now have the time and energy to ensure that all members of the division are fulfilling their responsibilities; the opportunity to interact with each member and each group on an academic and a personal level; and the confidence and support of the division members (both full-time and adjunct) and the administration to continue to build our community. As chairs, I believe we must remember that we function as facilitators, constantly walking that fine line between supervision and control, determining when to intercede and to organize the departments into a unified force to confront important departmental, campus or district issues and when it is more advisable to step back and to allow the departments, and/or individuals, to function independently. Our communication styles and interaction must change on a daily, even hourly basis, constantly assessing our audience and its needs, moving from a very conversational style with a colleague over a cup of coffee; changing immediately to a more administrative, structured style in a department or

division meeting; and finally taking on the very firm and formal style required when dealing with departmental problems. This is a learning process, and we are bound to make mistakes. It may take the overzealous leader, like me, more time and reflection to learn when to change from the role as leader and builder of community to that of supporter of and participant in the community.